

WASHINGTON POST
3 March 1987

Baker Shows Light Touch in New Job

Staff Chief's Debut Contrasts With Style of 'Prime Minister' Regan

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Former senator Howard H. Baker Jr., making his first appearance in the White House briefing room as President Reagan's chief of staff, demonstrated yesterday that he takes his new job more seriously than he takes himself.

Displaying the comfort of an accomplished political performer who knows that he is following an unpopular act, Baker assured reporters that he has no intention of becoming "prime minister," the unofficial title bestowed on and accepted by his fallen predecessor, Donald T. Regan.

"I am acutely aware of the fact that Ronald Reagan is president and I am not, and that my role and responsibility is to serve as his chief of staff, to carry out his programs and proposals and to serve him in whatever capacity I can in that role," Baker said.

The contrast with Regan could not have been more stark. In the infrequent public appearances of his last months, Regan invariably was surrounded by a retinue of aides and Secret Service agents. He also used the imperial "we" when referring to himself and the president.

Baker arrived yesterday with a single aide and without pomp and circumstance. He said he intended to brief reporters regularly and, in the relaxed manner of a man who does not mind new challenges, he confessed that the job is more challenging than he had anticipated.

"I may not have to brief anymore," White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater quipped after Baker departed.

Despite the self-deprecation, Baker gave every appearance of being in charge. He came to the briefing

armed with the announcement that Robert M. Gates had withdrawn as the president's nominee to be director of central intelligence and a muted apology that Reagan has not chosen a replacement.

Baker also came prepared to deal with the sensitive question of Nancy Reagan, the nemesis of Regan in his fall from power. On a plane ride to Miami last week before he was tapped to become chief of staff, Baker had discussed the first lady with an editor of The Miami Herald, saying that "when she gets her hackles up, she can be a dragon."

Baker blandly acknowledged the accuracy of the quotation and called Nancy Reagan "a distinguished citizen" and "obviously a lady of strong convictions. That's what I meant."

When a reporter pursued this by asking Baker what he intended to talk about when he met the first lady later in the day, he said, "Whatever she wants to talk about."

Baker's mission yesterday was to defend the proposition that the president is healthy, vigorous and alert in the face of numerous suggestions—some by members of the Tower special review board—that Reagan is anything but that. Even in this difficult venture, Baker tried not to overdo it.

In the talk with the editor in which he had discussed Nancy Reagan, Baker had said that the president sometimes bore a "blank expression" when conversation turned to matters that had been discussed two weeks earlier.

Baker acknowledged the accuracy of this quotation, then tried to turn it to Reagan's advantage.

"In my experience as majority leader, I found that the president was as good as anybody in the give-and-take discussion on sensitive, important and complex issues but

that, when you approached him about it two weeks or two months later, you found that the half-life of the memory was short," Baker told a reporter. "But so is mine. And so is yours, I suspect."

The absence of tension that characterized the briefing was even more prevalent behind the scenes, according to White House officials.

Baker started the day by meeting with holdover officials and telling them that there will be no blanket firings. He asked departing political director Mitchell E. Daniels to stay on for another month. And he met with Fitzwater and said, "I want you to stay and take the blame."

"Thank you," replied Fitzwater, who took over a month ago from Larry Speakes and has displayed the light touch apparently valued by Baker.

"You can almost feel that a heavy hand has been lifted from the White House," a senior White House official said of Baker's first-day performance.

But Baker also made his weight felt. Officials said he decided before coming to the White House that Regan ally Peter J. Wallison, the White House counsel whose resignation was announced yesterday, should be replaced. Other Regan aides, known as "the mice," also are expected to be replaced.

Sources said Baker is participating actively in selecting a replacement for Gates. Baker has been distrustful of the Central Intelligence Agency's performance since Watergate days, when he once referred to the CIA as "animals crashing around in the forest" that he "could hear but not see."

Baker did not display these convictions publicly yesterday, apparently content to draw the contrast with the departed Regan and exercise his influence behind the scenes.